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*To Olive, for loving me despite it all*









The poppers hit. Purple jellyfish expanded and pulsated across the backs of Amy's eyelids. She had just enough time to get her mouth back on Reese's soft cock before her constant interior monologue, that complicated apparatus that processed all the raw signals coming in from her body into a tolerable meaning, for the first time in her life, cut out. Some critical component of consciousness withdrew from her body like the contact at the end of the needle lifted from a still spinning record. No words. No thought. Just the raw, unprocessed, open fire hydrants of data that rushed in from Amy's senses. Time became a slippery fish amongst it.

Fragments of atomized notions began to coagulate. Slips of words formed, as cosmic dust gloms together by its own weak gravity, drawn together into molecules of gas, pressed against other molecules, collectively gravitated pressure growing, until a change: fusion, heat, light—and Amy flared back into an interior language, into words and the possibility of reason. The purple jellyfish descended back into the depths. Her vision cleared. Where was she?

Oh. There: sobbing with Reese's cock in her mouth. Shivering. How long had she been sobbing? She didn't want to sob, she wanted to kiss the pretty dick resting on the pat of her tongue. For the last month, she had been obsessed with Reese; all she wanted to do was get closer and closer to her—to the point that cannibalism suddenly became appealing, and the phrase, "I just want to eat you up," took on shades of the literal—digestive incorporation being the only act that Amy could imagine to get her closer to Reese than sex. And Reese seemed to feel the same about her, although some inner part of Amy just couldn't trust that Reese meant it when she said so. Just an hour before, Amy had watched Reese brush her teeth, Reese's long brown hair hanging loose, and her arm pistonning back and forth

so hard as she brushed that her tits waggled side-to-side under her slinky nightgown. Amy decided it was the sexiest thing she had ever seen, topping whatever other action she'd decided fifty other times that day with Reese was the previous sexiest vision ever. The simultaneous emotions of wanting Reese so bad, the happiness of actually having her, and the fear that something might happen to either her or Reese to ruin it all made her stomach fizz with a virulent form of a crush.

Mixed in with the crush-sickness, stiffening it out the saccharine, floated a few drops of unease. Amy's trust of Reese was shaky. Or rather, the fact that she didn't fully trust Reese, that she couldn't quite flushly map the Reese she knew onto the Reese about whom she'd heard stories. The striking expression, "Suite of Personality Disorders," had been said to her about Reese twice by two different people. Though Amy couldn't say whether the expression had been repeated simply because it was a catchy queer-approved pseudo-psychological way to talk shit that had spread among those who discussed Reese, or whether the phrase arose independently because it apparently described Reese so well. But either way, the

general consensus when Amy moved Reese into her apartment a week after meeting was: 1) Yes, that's exactly how Reese operates and 2) Girl, be careful.

The first person to use the expression “suite of personality disorders” about Reese had been a trans guy named Ricky, whom Reese had dumped cold when she took up and moved in with Phillip, only a few weeks after meeting him, while Ricky had been stupid enough to believe that he and Reese had been dating.

“I don’t know exactly what Reese’s diagnosis would be,” Ricky told Amy, when she volunteered to help him fix his motorcycle, which mostly consisted of handing him tools; Amy was ideal for the task because she knew enough about engines and tools to play assistant but she also understood that fixing motorcycles with a trans guy was gender performance validation time for them both, “but it’s got to be a whole suite of personality disorders.”

“Come on,” Amy chided, “just say you don’t like her, don’t play armchair psychiatrist.”

Ricky hesitated. He’d propped his motorcycle, some sort of 1970s-era Honda, on its center stand in the middle of the Bushwick sidewalk. Pedestrians

stepped over the scattered paneling he'd removed; one woman had to tugged frantically on her little bulldog's leash when the animal raised his leg and made his plans for the seat fasteners known. "Reese has a lot of amazing qualities," Ricky said, "but I'm probably the wrong person to enumerate them 'cause—and it hurts my pride to say this—I was stupid enough to let her casually break my heart. But I'm not going to say anything more if you're too wrapped up with her to hear it."

"No, please." Ricky had demurred the first few times she'd asked what happened between them. And secretly, volunteering to watch him fix his motorcycles was less about gender-validation time than fact-finding.

"She's so incredibly charming when she wants to be," Ricky said, crouching by the chain, "but she has only a few close friends. That alcoholic fuck-up, Mae, who I trust even less than her, and otherwise, just whoever else is infatuated with her at any given moment. Sociopaths and pathological liars are charming like that. They'll read you, process you, figure out your insecurities, then tell you everything you want to hear because until they switch it off, they believe it too. But

eventually, it falls apart, and you figure out it isn't true—can you put a 8 mm socket on the ½ inch ratchet?"

Amy fished out the socket and handed it to him. She noticed that he gripped the chain without regard for getting grease all over his hands. Very masculine. Last time she had seen him he had one of those ironic queer bowl cuts that AFABs inexplicably loved. Having worn that cut herself as a little child, Amy couldn't quite shake her infantile associations with that look, the faded memory of sitting in a barber's chair with a balloon-printed bib around her tiny neck as hair fell away from the sides of her head in tufts under the buzzer's drone, while the barber called her "little man" and her mom tutted "Handsome!" Still, she always complimented bowl cuts, because at that time, she'd made enthusiastic appreciation of queer style an important part of her social approach, regardless of her actual opinions. However, thank god, this time he had shaved off the bowl and left his hair and stubble the same length, which Amy could compliment with much more genuine gushing.

"Reese doesn't tell you what's true," Ricky concluded, "She tells what you most need to hear. Stuff that you'd told yourself no one would ever

understand about you—she figures it out and tells you it. Tells you that the thing about you that you most want to be is exactly what she loves about you. It's fucking intoxicating. It's like drinking validation from some psychoactively seductive source. She loves being that source. She loves being the thing you need so bad. She means it all too, but only for the moment she's directing her charm at you. Like the love and joy you feel on molly or something, it's real while you feel it, but only for that long."

He grimaced, as he pried loose a bolt. "She's not intentionally cruel. That's why I say she's just got like, personality disorders. And she ends up hurting people, which makes her alone, which makes her lonely enough to do it even more."

Amy didn't know how much to believe. The tendency of lay queers to assign other people personality disorders struck her as boring and tautological: A certain person does a thing because that person is the type of person who is compelled to do that thing. No capacity for either change or responsibility or even a consideration of the Why much less the Hows of a particular human. Why does the cat torture the injured mouse? Because the cat is a cat—and so shall it be forever. Besides, rumor

was, famously stoic Ricky had gotten drunk and then loudly, inconsolably, and theatrically sobbed in the corner of a Hey Queen party the night he discovered Reese had left him to move in with a finance guy. Maybe he had to overstate the case or pathologize Reese into a psychotically manipulative emotional mastermind in order to explain his own vulnerability to heartbreak.

“Look,” Ricky said, reading Amy’s skepticism. “Here’s a story: one time I slept over at her house. If you know her, you already know that for some reason she is incapable of hanging up a towel after using it. She left early to meet someone for coffee, so I stayed in bed for a while, then I took a shower, picked up her towel from the floor—she only had one—dried off with it, and carefully folded it in thirds and hung it up over the top of her closet door. Then I left. Three days later we go to her house, and we go inside. And the towel is exactly where I left it. But she’s freshly showered and made up.”

“Uh, huh,” Amy said. She wasn’t sure she was going to believe any story that turned on a towel. But on the other hand it was true: Reese left all her clothes and towels wherever they fell when she was done with them.

Ricky dropped the ratchet to focus on telling his story. It hit the concrete sidewalk with a clink. He needed to wave his hands around in order to express how much this incident exasperated him. “So I ask her where she got ready, and she gives me a look like I’m crazy and says, ‘At home of course.’ So I point to the towel and I was like: how did you dry off? That towel hasn’t moved in three days.”

Ricky paused for effect. “She fucking lost it. She doesn’t say she has two towels. Or that she air-dried herself. Instead she starts screaming at me like, ‘WHAT ARE YOU A TOWEL DETECTIVE? DID YOU FUCKING SOLVE THE CASE OF THE FOLDED TOWEL?!’ It was almost funny, but she was so wild-eyed about it that it was straight-up alarming. Especially because she wasn’t trying to be funny, she wanted to demean me. It just devolved into what kind of insecure loser I was leaving booby-trap towels in her room. Calling me jealous. Asking what kind of man I was who had to know where she was all the time? Why don’t I just believe her? Why do I have to leave her towel tests? And I—you know, I just backed down, because, you know? What am I going to do, make my last stand over a towel? And

as a result, I never really asked where she was that night. Or if she was gone for three days, or just one night. But I was dying inside, because it's one thing to just be like, okay, she's seeing someone else. But the way she does it, it's like she furtively hiding another life, like maybe you don't even really know who she is. And here's why it's poison: on one hand, she has this incredible ability to sense what you desperately need to hear, to see your insecurities and placate them. On the other hand, she's furtive, secretive, and she lies. So the result is, it feels like the things she told me that felt so good are lies. That, in reality, everything I fear about myself is correct. It's murder on your self-esteem. You doubt yourself, and end up feeling way worse about yourself when she leaves."

"And you, know what?" he continued. "I finally put together a conjecture: whose towel was she probably actually using? That finance douchebag! Who was secretly paying for the apartment! Which she also hid from me! A guy who IS JEALOUS AND HAS TO KNOW WHERE SHE IS ALL THE TIME! THE KIND OF GUY SHE DEMEANED ME FOR BEING IS WHAT SHE REALLY WANTED

ALL ALONG!" At this last statement, his hands flapped around like wounded seagulls. He inhaled, calmed himself, and picked up the dropped ratchet. "I'm telling you: personality disorders!"

His assessment had been echoed even by those who'd never crushed out on Reese, or had shrugged off her charms. Ingrid, one of the trans girls who'd been around Brooklyn at least as long as Reese, had said, half as admiration and half as condemnation, "Reese is the only trans girl in this city whose incessant drama really has almost nothing to do with the fact that she's trans. Her drama is just what she makes for herself as a woman."

Two weeks later, Amy lay crumpled in bed, having inhaled poppers for the first time, having decided that nothing felt so good as being vulnerable to Reese, so fuck whatever everyone else said: might as well enhance that vulnerability with chemicals. Her whole problem pre-transition had been a complete inability to ever let anyone past her defense far enough for Amy to get vulnerable, before she shut down or disassociated. And if Reese had some magical ability to see what Amy most craved, to see past her crust of armor to what

that soft, mewling, vulnerable inner self most wanted—then please, oh, please, bring it on.

Amy hadn't expected to have such a strong crush—only in movies did people fall for each other in a matter of weeks or days, and even in movies only the most sentimental characters could believably do so. So when it happened to her, she wasn't ready for it. Not just Reese—she wasn't ready for anyone. For about a year and a half, peering into her future provided her with only the haziest of views, a grey mist in which the barest outlines of events only begin to reveal themselves one to two months away. Transition had been the first of a number of unthinkables. Other unthinkables had been: her long-term girlfriend breaking up with her, her parents refusing to speak with her, the shattering of her own confidence. She'd lied to herself about her own gender for so long, and lied so deeply, how could she have any faith in her own convictions? No matter how good Reese was at lying to her, Amy knew she bore the true genius for deceiving herself.

**W**hoa, babe, whoa, whoa," Reese's voice came gently. "Take it easy, sweetie. What's the matter?" Her hand on Amy's shoulder gently pushed

Amy away: still uncoordinated, Amy tumbled back like a rice sack into the scrum of blankets, one leg falling off the mattress. Amy's vision came to rest on the "Attack of The 50 Foot Woman" poster that Reese had cut into three strips, and that hung as a triptych by the now-darkened window. Amy didn't like the poster at all, but even conceding to Reese the chance for things she didn't enjoy had a certain pleasure—a perverse stab of joy waking up every morning to the sight of stupid kitsch, in what had before been her intentionally sparsely decorated and decluttered bedroom, because it meant she no longer inhabited it alone.

Post-poppers, Amy couldn't stop crying or shivering. Couldn't explain that everything was fine. Instead, she managed to say, "Ooohwee," and weakly held out her hand, trying to signal that everything is fine. Her teeth clattered, and Reese leaned over, pressed her body weight down on Amy, and wrapped the comforter around them both. Reese's amused voice showed only a touch of concern as she murmured, "Baby, what just happened?"

Only twenty minutes later has Amy returned sufficiently to herself to begin to explain. Amy has made a seat with four pillows: Reese's two and

her two. She can easily tell her pillows and Reese's pillows apart, because she can't seem to get Reese to stop sleeping in her makeup, and two of the four pillow cases, once a bright solid yellow, now have squiggly patterns, single eyeliner wings pointing off in haphazard directions amongst the centipede footprints of mascara-drenched lashes. Amy's made a little seat with those pillows, while Lana Del Rey plays from Reese's laptop.

"God, those poppers made me so dumb," Amy ventured.

"Of course," countered Reese, who snapped shut her laptop now that Amy no longer appeared aphasic. "Poppers are supposed to make you dumb. A dumb little cock-slut with zero inhibitions—just how you're cutest." Reese hesitated. This was perhaps too direct. For much as Amy is able to say that she's in love to the point of sickness—their sex had not been good. It had been tentative, quiet—both intense and mild. Penetration aborted in favor of oral, or even more frequently, mutual masturbation—the more sex became like cybersex or camming, only in person, the more comfortable Amy seemed. And in fact, the majority of the sexual experiences in which Amy had genuinely felt at ease

thus far in life had taken place within the safety of the internet, within easy reach of an OFF switch.

Reese had been trying to get Amy to loosen up, to begin to curb Amy of her habit to dissociate, panic, or shut down at the prospect of sex—to keep Amy present, and in the body Amy had spent a lifetime learning to avoid acknowledging. But the prospect of keeping Amy in her body, and present through sex, walked a tight-rope: tell Amy what to do too forcefully, and her shame at the prospect that she's not great at sex will make her dissociate, but leave her to her own devices and patterns, and she'll dissociate. Telling her what is cute might have been too much, so Reese added, "but poppers are not supposed to make you shiver and cry. That is not how I want you."

Amy nodded. "I'm not sure why I shivered. Maybe my blood pressure dropped too much." Amy's seen signs at Callen Lorde warning against the use of poppers while on Viagra because both cause blood pressure drops. She hasn't taken Viagra, but she has uncommonly low blood pressure, a consequence of her spiro, the testosterone blocker she took every morning in two round 100 mg pills that taste like breath mints made from corpses.

Reese said gently. “But, baby, why did you start crying?”

Amy tried out an explanation, “The poppers made me dumb,” she said, “that was the problem and what was so good. So dumb I had to be present.”

The first year of transition, Amy discovered, was about learning how much you’ve lied to yourself. How unreliable your own self assessments are and how little the sense of self from your past can be put to good use in transition. The awful part was watching the failure what queers had learned from therapy and generalized into calling “your coping mechanisms.” As those mechanisms that kept fear and pain hidden flame out, there’s a moment in which you can catch a glimpse of how scared you’ve been and the degree of pain in which you’ve been living as boy, before that pain and fear actually hits you and shreds you—the way in which, in 1950s era films of certain men in early atomic bomb tests watched the flash and mushroom cloud rise, men who stood marveling at the Shiva-esque destruction for just a split second before the shockwave and heat sent their searing bodies flying backwards along with the camera recording those bodies, and after which nothing could be seen, only felt.

And then you develop new coping mechanisms, new language, new walls to keep yourself safe. The problem with the poppers is that it made her too dumb to keep all that cognitive machinery going. It all ground to a halt, and instead of the new lies, she fell into direct contact with a raw fact: she was a girl in love with a girl. It was overwhelming. It was all she had ever hoped for.





To say that Amy had never before had sex as a woman is the kind of thing that trans activists would take issue with. Feel free to peruse the Tumblr-industrial complex for all the ways that *trans women have always been women*—even before they transitioned. But for Amy, that moment on poppers was the first time she truly had sex as a woman because it was the first time she saw herself fucking as a woman without laying a psychic veil over whatever sexual scene was occurring, the first time it just *was* rather than something that, with effort, she could manage to see. The first time she had been present, present as the woman she so

obviously was, a woman who required no effort to be present, and who connected directly with Reese.

So often when she had sex, she allocated the majority of her mental capacity to managing her own impression of herself as she fucked, with a secondary concern being her partner's impression of her, because the stray comment or expression might in turn dangerously destabilize her own carefully managed impression of herself. This allocation left little mental energy left for actually desiring her partner, much less vocalizing or displaying that desire. Which, she knew, did not make her a good lover. It made her a bad lover, and this was, in fact, her impression of her own sexual prowess: disappointing, tepid, with occasional flashes of mediocrity.

The exception to this was the men she slept with back when she was a cross-dresser and called herself a sissy or a trap. She did not care about those men, was not attracted to men, and so didn't care what their impressions were—they were simply another feminizing accessory, albeit a very difficult and unwieldy accessory. But when deployed right, they were even better than a corset for making a girl feel dainty. Their job was to provide lots of masculine contrast to her girliness, a task they set about

diligently, because most of them were straight-identified, married, and therefore very invested in getting to enjoy her body while avoiding any train of thought that set them to pondering why the thing that made their cock hard was a hard cock on a girl. The whole object of these encounters—and the men acted reciprocally—involved ignoring the man's needs in order to instead focus on herself, and what kind of gender it meant she had, that a man was using her for his own sexual enjoyment, even as she ignored the particular man and his particular need.

**A**my lost her virginity when she was fifteen to a seventeen-year-old cougar named Rosie. Rosie was punk, with piece-y bleached and waxed hair, and threadbare vintage shirts that advertised intentionally uncool brands—*Pepsi! Taste of a New Generation*—an overall gestalt that read to the adults in their lives as “troubled.” Rosie had been in and out of hospitals with an eating disorder, had tried both coke and heroin, and the rumor at school was that she had done anal after a rave with a twenty-eight-year-old, and whether or not that was true, she always made out with other girls at parties. Three weeks after Rosie and Amy slept together for their

one time, Rosie's parents mortgaged their house to send her to one of those military detox schools in the middle of the desert, where semi-professional guards locked kids into their rooms or left them in the middle of the wilderness. Amy never saw Rosie again after that.

The afternoon she lost her virginity, she had been given two hours to go home, put on a decent collared shirt, and get back to school for an awards ceremony for her baseball team. Her team had come in sixteenth in state, a feat that sounds solidly unimpressive, but because her school was a fraction of the size of the giant baseball breeding farms in the rural areas of the state, had become something of a miracle story. Amy, in her own miracle, ended up stealing the most bases in the league that season, a feat she accomplished by leaning into pitches, getting hit, and taking a free base, then stealing her way around like a twitchy squirrel. Bruises brindled her left arm and torso from March until June.

On the commuter train home, Rosie traced the stitching on Amy's jeans with her finger and said, "My parents aren't home." Which is how Amy's own parents ended up sitting together at a baseball awards ceremony, increasingly embarrassed,

as the coach repeatedly called out the name of their always-baffling teenager to come receive a plaque, while other parents stared at them questioningly, and yet no teenager materialized.

At that moment, the teenager in question was eating pussy. Something she'd never before done. She'd fingered a girl once—a girl who, to show she wasn't a slut, unbuttoned only the top button of her button-fly jeans, leaving Amy little room to actually maneuver or learn anything in the space between denim and body. When Amy went in for a kiss and got an ear, the girl began to giggle, and Amy was relieved to withdraw her hand; she'd been terrified and ashamed that she was doing everything wrong. That her inept and cramped fumbling would make obvious to the girl what Amy already knew: that there was something wrong with her masculinity. That she was flawed in deep and terrible ways as a boy, and worse, that anything to do with socially-expected sex caused these flaws to reveal themselves through fits of skin-crawling anxiety that lasted just until she could get her brain to short out. The only consolation came from the Y.A. books for girls that she'd taken from her sister and read in secret, where the common theme involved the anxious-making

awfulness of teenage sex. In light of these stories—except for the blustery eagerness to partake in sex that all the boys were supposed to have; an eagerness she barely registered in herself except as a social rite that was dangerous not to perform—she could convince herself she was normal. At least, that is, after a few days had passed and the anxiety had subsided into the more malleable phenomenon of memory.

Why had she gone home with Rosie? She knew her parents would be furious that she had skipped the awards. They had been so grateful that she'd finally given them something normal—a son who is good at baseball—to show her that they, yes, they could actually be proud of her. And then she'd stolen that from them. And why? So she could tentatively go down on Rosie. She had her face close to Rosie's vagina, her body tense, like a cat attempting to sniff a candle's flame, ready to pull away at any sign of danger from this apparition. And yet still, why?

Did she want Rosie's vagina? Did she want to taste it? That was what she was supposed to want. How many boys had she heard describe the taste of pussy? She opened her eyes and looked at it.

She didn't know what was what or where. Stupid. How stupid she was. Above her, Rosie waited with her own eyes shut. Then Rosie craned her neck forward and peered at Amy, "How are you doing down there?"

"Fine," Amy said. How incredibly stupid. *Fine!* The least committal, most unsexy word you could say. *Fine* was what you said when someone asked you how you were, and you didn't want to talk about it. She might as well have said, "I am confused and ashamed."

To counter for her shame, she began to lick. Hoping to convince Rosie of the eagerness she was supposed to have. Maybe this is how you did it.

"Higher up." Rosie said from above.

"What?"

"Use your tongue higher." Rosie had her eyes shut again, frowning like she was concentrating hard on some problem. Amy cringed. It was shameful how much she didn't know.

Amy tried again, and after a moment Rosie stopped her. "Look," said Rosie, she spread her labia with two fingers, "this is my clit." Amy nodded, but a second later, she realized she'd been too ashamed at having needed the instruction and so she'd been

examining Rosie's face for mockery or derision and hadn't paid attention. This is not a big deal, she told herself. It is your first time. Rosie knows that. She can't expect you to be good.

"Is it good?" she asked Rosie.

"Yes," said Rosie, flatly, in a way that Amy knew was a lie. What else could Rosie say?

"Good." Amy said. "I like it too." Two lies.

The only thing worse would be if Rosie faked an orgasm. Amy had seen an episode of *Sex and the City* where the four women talked about inadequate men they'd had to fake it for. Rosie's leg twitched, and Amy, to punish herself, thought: fake.

How long did it go on for? Until Amy felt Rosie gently touch her hair, which was short, fuzzily growing out from a buzz cut she'd impulsively given herself one night.

"Let's take a break." Rosie said. "Maybe just have sex. I like sex best."

"Okay," said Amy. She pushed herself up and tucked her legs under her to look around the room. A girl's room, more feminine than Rosie's punk aesthetic might have indicated. Lavender accent wall, that Rosie said she had painted

herself. Nail polish lined up along the windowsill under diaphanous sea-green curtains wafting inwards on a breeze. Amy loved getting girls to paint her nails. It happened less and less though—in middle school, girls loved to paint the boys' nails. By high school, they mostly didn't give a fuck what boys did with their nails. Clothes piled up beside the bed, with a pleasantly faint odor of Rosie, a scent that Amy previously hadn't known was the odor of Rosie, until she smelled the clothes, and then it clicked. Next to the bed was a copy of *Prozac Nation*. Amy reached for it. She had never read the book, but she had gathered that this was a book you were supposed to make fun of. A lot of Amy's cultural touchstones were like that: things to which she was ignorant or indifferent, but upon which she opined her received takes. She didn't make fun of the book though. On the bed, Rosie looked both so frail and so beautiful beneath the sheets—she wanted Rosie to hold her, or to hold Rosie. She did not feel sexual. Once, on the train home, Rosie told Amy that she'd lost so much fat from her bulimia that her body grew a layer of soft down to stay warm and compensate for the lack of fat insulation. Amy didn't know how to help, but she liked how

Rosie had gotten in the habit of confiding in her on the way home. Rosie had asked her if she could keep secrets, and for once, true to her word, Amy repeated nothing that Rosie had told her.

But looking over Rosie's body, half illuminated by sunlight, with blocks of color from a small stained glass charm hanging suction-cupped to the window, Amy didn't see any fur or down. Rosie's skin just looked soft and bare. Over the winter, when no one could see and it was acceptable to wear windbreaker pants to practice, Amy had shaved her legs, and gotten terrible razor burn that turned into acne as seemingly each hair on the back of her thighs inflamed itself into a pimple. Bad enough that it hurt to sit down. How did girls like Rosie avoid that?

"It's good," said Rosie, of the book. "I'm angry about the same things as her."

"Should I read it?"

Rosie scoffed. "I don't think it'd be your thing."

What was Amy's thing? Pop-punk and baseball? That's what people thought. Amy had pierced her ears over the winter, but her coach made her take them out. When her mom saw the little studs, her mom called her a dork. She didn't think her

mom was using the word “dork” correctly, and that probably the word her mom was looking for but didn’t know was “poseur.” Still, getting called a dork hurt her feelings, because she understood what her mom meant, and if even her culturally illiterate mom could interpret as much, the other kids absolutely could.

“Do you have condoms?” Amy asked. She had actually never worn a condom.

“No, I’m on the pill. One of the few things my parents and I agree on.”

Amy nodded, and Rosie smiled, and cocked her head to the side. “Take off your boxers.” Amy did as she was told. She was not hard. She didn’t know if her penis was good. Besides size, she didn’t even know all the other ways it might not be good. Probably it wasn’t, and she fought the urge to cover herself with a sheet.

“Come here,” Rosie said, and Amy cuddled up close to her. Rosie’s hand touched her. Amy was desperate to get hard. She began to concoct a fantasy. Something that fit with what was happening, but wasn’t actually what was happening. She was Rosie’s pet. Her owner wanted her to get hard, and she didn’t want to disappoint. It would happen whether

she wanted it to or not. Her owner thought she was pretty. She looked at one of the bras lying on the floor and told herself, *that's my bra, she took it off of me.*

“Oh, you like that,” Rosie said. Amy was hard.

“Yeah,” Amy whispered, afraid that the intrusion of reality might disperse the fantasy that let her get hard.

“You ready?” Rosie asked.

“Yeah.”

Rosie threw off the sheets, lay on her back. She guided Amy in. The first thoughts Amy had were of warmth.

“Slow at first,” Rosie said. She had a half smile. It was too much. Too close to being laughed at. Amy shut her eyes and focused. But she could feel the sexual charge leaving her. She pulled back up the fantasy: she wasn’t really fucking Rosie. Rosie was fucking her. She belonged to Rosie. She was Rosie’s girl.

“Yeah,” Amy said, and Rosie made a noise like an affirmation.

What did she wish Rosie would say to her? Maybe something like you’re mine.

“You’re mine,” she whispered to Rosie.

Rosie’s eyes widened in surprise and she pulled Amy closer.

Rosie liked it, Amy realized. Rosie liked what Amy liked.

What else did Amy want to hear? She submerged back into the fantasy, like sinking into a pool. She was in Rosie's room. Rosie was fucking her. Rosie was grabbing her body. Telling her she was a hot little thing. And Amy was grabbing Rosie's body. Was fucking her. She tried to call Rosie a hot little thing, but the words choked in her. "So hot," she grunted. And back into the fantasy: Rosie was calling her a slut, had a hand on her neck.

Could she do that? "I wanna make you my slut," Amy said.

Rosie looked up at her quizzically. "You like talking dirty," Rosie stated.

"Do you like it?"

Rosie grinned. "Yeah."

Amy grabbed Rosie's hair. Pulled her around. "Can we do doggie?" Amy asked.

"Yeah," said Rosie, and pushed Amy off, turned over. And then Amy was back in. Both into Rosie and into the fantasy. In two places at once. Amy wanted her ass grabbed. She grabbed Rosie's ass. Rosie moaned. She pictured Rosie pinching her nipples, and reached around and

pinched Rosie's tiny breasts. And then, without warning, Amy was coming. Not in the room with Rosie, but in another similar room, where Rosie was spanking her, where she was Rosie's little slut, where Rosie had her captive, where she was Rosie's good girl, forever and ever.

And then again, she was back in Rosie's actual room. She'd collapsed on top of Rosie. "Wow," said Rosie, and it sounded genuine. Slowly she pulled herself off of Rosie and Rosie flipped over, and she nestled under Rosie's arm. Amazingly, Amy had the sense that she had done a good job, that she was a good lover. Wherever she had gone, Rosie didn't notice. And maybe that's how you have sex.

Later, much later, she would learn the word for this: dissociation. She'd figured she had just been fantasizing. The word dissociate sounded at first pathologizing to her—why should she be accused of dissociating when normal people get to call it fantasizing and talk about how fantasy just made their sex better and better? But pathology felt more and more apt the more sex she had. It took her a while to understand the cyclical loneliness of disappearing in dissociation during sex. That people have sex for a

shared joy that keeps an existential loneliness at bay, so when she disappeared inside of herself, her more experienced partners felt that lack, and her disappearance hurt them. Since she dreaded hurting those she most wanted to connect with, she grew to dread and avoid sex with specifically those most-liked people, and of course, to dread having sex with a person causes even more hurt for that person, driving her away—concluding in a final angst in which the loneliness that had made Amy want to connect with someone in the first place returned upon her tenfold.

In fact, it was who Reese had best named the dissociated sex Amy had been having for most of her life. “You just haven’t unlearned how to fuck like a crypto-trans,” Reese said. “Cis women take a long time to realize when someone’s doing it, because they often don’t even know the name for what they’re seeing or what it means. Trans woman see it right away. It’s how the most awful chasers fuck, because the most awful chasers are repressed trans themselves. Meaning, most of us have ourselves fucked that way at one time or another.”

But the worst part came later that night with Rosie. Some part of her performance changed Rosie’s estimation of her. She wasn’t just the sweet

boy whom Rosie could confide in on the train home. Amy's performance had created a fundamental difference or separation between her and Rosie. Something that hadn't existed before. Something animal in her. The makings of a man. A brute who could take a woman. Rosie talked to her differently—like she had more respect for Amy, but also, had to maintain a careful distance. This was a budding man, after all: powerful, dangerous.

The person outlined by Rosie's new deference horrified Amy. What did she really want from Rosie? She wanted to sit on Rosie's bed, surrounded by all that girl stuff and get her nails painted. She wanted to be cuddled. The thing Rosie seemed to newly admire in her was everything that would lose her what she wanted from Rosie. And is that what she was? A brute? Someone who takes what he wants from women? She pictured how the sex would have looked to someone watching: her behind Rosy, holding a fistful of Rosie's hair, hairy thighs thrusting away. The image made her sick. Like there was a potential rapist lurking inside of her. A beast who women were wise to eye warily.

"We can do this again," Rosie said, walking Amy to the corner through her backyard, a route

that she chose in case her neighbors reported to her parents that there was a boy leaving the front door while they were out. Amy agreed. She had to agree. That was what she was supposed to do. But Rosie and Amy never did it again. Amy's parents grounded her for embarrassing them at the baseball awards, and by the time they freed Amy again, Rosie's parents had shipped Rosie off to Utah or wherever.

Over the next few years, Amy sharpened this mode of dissociative sex, mostly in order to fulfill a social obligation that she felt from both women and boys. Women, who wanted to see Amy respond to their beauty, their flirting, in the correct ways. Boys, who wanted to brag about conquests, or more commonly bond over them. By Amy's late teens, sharing attempted conquests had become the primary and most thrilling activity among boys. The way they got to know and trust each other. The girls were incidental. More than that, they were vaguely disdained in subtle manners by the boys—in college, a girl Amy talked to about her high school years made a strong case for calling this disdain misogyny—because girls frustratingly didn't always conform to the boys' plans. Still, enough of them

did for Amy and her friends. And so the important questions: how many girls would be at the party? Did you see that short girl? Did you get with her? She had nice titties didn't she. Did you give it to her? No? She left you blue-balled? Sucks, bro. Bitches be cray.

And the more Amy went along with this, the more she grew to fear sex. Fear the come-down afterwards, when she couldn't dissociate any longer, and had to confront her obvious brutishness. Her own masculinity. The tight cliques of girls that saw how other, dangerous, and terribly male she was. How she wasn't one of them. They might have said she was cute, have noticed her abs or her pretty-boy face. But she was not to be allowed in amongst the girls. Amy resented it. Resented herself. She was disgusted at the way she craved approval through behavior that made her feel like a cosmic joke: an asshole with no self-esteem who wants to be one of the girls so badly there aren't even the words for it, so gets close in the crudest of ways instead. At times the resentment spiked into self-loathing—whole weeks when she either couldn't bear to look at herself in the mirror or didn't want to do anything else. Watching the girls

she knew, a burning jealousy would stab through her. Little things. How they plucked their eyebrows. How they put their hand on each other's arms. Jealous. Jealous. Jealous. She resented herself, but she also resented them. So it was easy for her to call girls bitches. To dismiss their concerns, which could cruelly never apply to her. To charm the boys with jokes about the silliness of girls, of femininity in general.

Her school had a tradition, "Student Switch Day," where once a year, each student drew another student's name from a hat, then dressed like that student for a day, and attended that other student's classes on their schedule. Amy got Mary-Anne's name. Mary-Anne was full-figured and gorgeous and probably would have been popular had she not loved horses so much that she wouldn't ever shut up about them. Her mother had entered her in child pageants when she was younger, and then, when she hit puberty very young, nine or ten, made her eat toilet paper to starve the fat going to her hips and chest. The fiber in the toilet paper would curb Mary-Anne's appetite, her mother said. But by fourteen Mary-Anne had the biggest breasts at school.

Other girls had told Amy to ask Mary-Anne to lend her a dress and do her makeup. And Amy longed to ask Mary-Anne for that, longed for it so badly it was terrifying, a pressure that she worried would burst through her if she indulged in it. The night she drew Mary-Anne's name, Amy stared at herself in a mirror, trying to picture what Mary-Anne's eye-shadow and mascara could do for her face. But she never asked Mary-Anne for anything. Instead she found a triple-F bra at Goodwill, stuffed it, and wore it the day of Student Switch. She did nothing else to impersonate Mary-Anne.

Amy arrived to school on Switch Day with the bra stuffed under Amy's otherwise everyday clothes. Mary-Anne's face fell the second she saw Amy; it was a look of pure hurt, crestfallen with disappointment in what Amy found to imitate in her existence and body. "Why are you so mean?" she asked Amy. And suddenly Amy saw what she had done: a pair of huge tits. She was saying that's all Mary-Anne was. And at that moment, when she might have apologized, might have found the courage in herself to ask Mary-Anne for help, to tell her she wanted to understand her better, that she wanted to be like her if only for a day, Jon McNelly came by, pointed

at the giant stuffed bra on Amy's chest and said, "NAILED IT!" Mary-Anne managed a smile with her mouth, but her eyes went wet, and she nodded and said, "I hope you have a good day being me."

Amy considered that she ought to take off the bra and abate her cruelty for Mary-Anne's sake. But she didn't. She wore it all day. She liked wearing a bra. She liked people commenting on her boobs. That night, she wore the bra again when she jerked off to the fantasy of Mary-Anne forcing her to dress up in her clothes, then on her way to school the next morning, tossed it in a dumpster.





If the afternoon at Rosie's had been Amy's first time having sex with a woman, Patrick had been her first time having sex with a guy. Although whether Patrick was, in fact, a man, Amy later came to doubt.

He was the first maybe-trans person she had ever met. Although, he probably wouldn't have called himself trans. Just a crossdresser. Which is what Amy had learned to call herself at the time. But no one had ever seen her dressed up. Not even on Halloween. She figured by the time she got to college and had a lock on her door, she'd spend a bunch of her time behind it dressed up pretty. But

by the end of her freshman year, she had barely accumulated the basics of a wardrobe. Her makeup remained in an equally dismal state. She'd had no one to teach her the art of makeup and so stuck to the three cosmetic basics whose application is more or less explained by the containers in which they are packaged: lipstick, eyeliner, and mascara.

Her frequent attempts to shop for women's clothes failed more often than not. She never went into women's boutiques—it'd be impossible to explain herself in there. Instead, she found department stores—Walmarts and Targets—taking circuitous routes around the edges of women's wear departments, pretending to be shopping in the nearby men's sportswear departments, or feigning interest in adjacent kitchen appliances, then snatching something—anything: a swimsuit, a purse, a blouse—from the edges of the women's section. The whole exercise humiliated her. She looked like a creep, she knew. But she couldn't be cool. The closer she got to actually buying clothes, actually browsing in the women's section, the more her blood rushed and her face reddened. The more her hands shook. There wasn't any way to be casual while holding a pair of panties and looking like you're at risk of

passing out. Because who does that? What the fuck was wrong with her? And how much other random shit did she buy attempting to hide those panties? Did she think the checkout girl wouldn't think a college boy buying a babydoll dress wasn't weird if the purchase also included three bags of chips, some beef jerky, and a folding chair?

She found Patrick at the end of her freshman year. Forty miles away. A thirty-six year-old divorced hotel clerk, posting in a Yahoo group that he wanted someone to dress up with. Just two guys, dressing up in lingerie, to relax. He undercut his own casual, no-homo, bro-vibe by adding that he was versatile.

*Nineteen old college student. 5'8" 140 lbs. Do you have lingerie for me?* It took Amy two hours of deliberation to send that message. *No, but there's a store for crossdressers where I get mine,* Patrick replied. *I'll pick you up from your college if you want and we can go tomorrow.*

Which is how Amy ended up standing on the driveway of her college, wearing a hood low over her eyes, as if her pervert tranny intentions could be read plainly on her face by any other passing student who glanced her way.

Picture an anonymous strip-mall, veneered in a too-red brick, housing a Subway franchise, a vacuum cleaner store, and sandwiched between the two, a dingy painted sign that read: Glamour Boutique. Now picture Amy's disappointed face.

With a name like Glamour Boutique, she had been naively expecting, well, glamour: three-way mirrors, flattering directional lighting, and sheeny dresses hung on racks of brushed metal. Instead, racks of clothing crammed the small space. The clothing mostly fell into two categories: frumpy or sexy, like the clientele wanted to either deflect all attention from themselves or wild out in one big skin-revealing splurge. In the back hung black latex and vinyl fetish gear, French maid outfits, schoolgirl ensembles, and frilly sissy party dresses.

At the counter, the clerk, a goth girl with straight black hair and thick winged eyeliner, rang up the purchase of a middle-aged man in golf clothes. The golfer kept his eyes fixed in middle distance, refusing to make eye contact with anyone, which allowed Amy to examine him surreptitiously. Maybe he told his wife he'd gone golfing. Maybe he'd just finished a round of golf. Either way, a satin corset lay on the counter in front of him.

The goth clerk met Amy's glance briefly, and gave a slight nod, then looked away tactfully. After the golfer left, the clerk watched Amy and Patrick without appearing to, her body language communicating that she presumed nothing. But Amy couldn't help imagining what she thought. A larger balding man, and younger slender boy. She probably thinks I'm the sissy, Amy thought, and the thought both excited and ashamed her.

Amy paused at a shelf of silicone breast forms. "Let me know if you want to try any," the clerk said. She pointed at a mannequin wearing a bra and forms, "We have a special sheer bra with pockets that can hold them so that you can see the nipples. But you can also wear them in any regular bra."

Instinctively, Amy shook her head. Then caught herself. "How much are they?" she asked.

"Depends on the cup size. What size are you?"

Amy didn't know how to answer the question. Obviously, she had no breasts.

The girl tried again. "What size bras do you have?"

"I don't know."

"Well, the sizes bigger than D are 160 for the forms, the smaller sizes are 130. All the bras are forty."

“Can I see the C cup?” Amy said.

The girl appraised her. “I’m guessing you’re maybe a 34. But I can measure you if you want.”

Rarely had Amy wanted something so badly. “No. I mean, yeah. Okay.”

In the dressing room, which was a curtain pulled over a closet in the corner, the girl directed Amy to turn around. Amy wasn’t sure how, in this moment, she realized the girl was a transsexual. Some combination of slight aesthetics clicked into place. *I’m getting a bra fitting from a transsexual!* she told herself, not quite believing it. She wanted to ask the girl everything, but even more than that, she wanted to be cool. She didn’t want the girl to know what a creep she was. A creep who had jerked off to transsexual porn the night before.

“Yes,” the girl said, as she wrapped the tape measure around Amy’s chest, “You can wear either a 34 or a 36. I’d recommend a 34 because bras stretch as they wear out.”

The girl brought her a 34, with silicone breast forms already in the sheer pockets. The silicone gave off a faint chemical odor, but were pleasingly pliable when squeezed. When the curtain dropped, Amy put it on, and the weight, naturally pulling on her

chest, triggered something like an endorphin rush. She gave a little hop, to see them bounce, to feel the weight and movement. A giggle slipped out, like a bubble.

She opened the curtain. “I’m going to buy this,” she told the girl. “Can I wear it to try on other clothes?”

“Sure, of course,” the girl said. “I’ll just take the boxes up to the counter.”

From behind her, Patrick gave the thumbs-up. “Looking good,” Patrick said and Amy had the strange urge to cover her fake breasts, her fake nipples strategically visible through the sheer fabric.

Amy had expected Patrick to be something quite different than what he turned out to be. She had imagined someone quite masculine: the stereotypical man-in-a-dress. Some cleft-chinned action-hero with blue eyeshadow—Patrick Swayze in *To Wong Foo*. That’s the best trans she’d seen on TV. Her other options were *Silence of the Lambs* or *The Bird Cage* or maybe *The Crying Game*. Her three options: horror, mockery or tragedy. And since she didn’t plan to meet a horror, her brain went to mockery: maybe someone like in the *Little Britain*

sketches, that recurring bit in which two men in over-the-top feminine garb—Shirley Temple curls, petticoats, corsets—but with obvious mustaches, stroll around London insisting in smug falsetto, “I’m a *lady!* I do *lady* things!”

She had no reason to think Patrick would have been any of those things. Look at Amy herself: neither comedy nor horror nor tragic, neither especially masculine nor overtly striving for femme. Just a slender blonde college kid standing on a curb in a red hoodie that repeated washings and wear had faded close to pink; not exactly a macho style, but passably close to indie rock.

When Patrick pulled up, a stab of disappointment came over Amy. Nothing about him struck her as notable: moderately tall, stooped shoulders lost in a knit polo shirt, hair on the top of his head nearly melted away, small neutral eyes peering at her through wire-frame glasses. Even his car: a ’90s-era Geo Metro, a car so nondescript she had forgotten it existed until she saw him in one. She might have thought she had the wrong guy, except that he rolled down the window and asked, “Tiffany?” the name she’d given him for herself. He hadn’t given her his femme name, *I’m just always Patrick*, he’d written.

She got in, and he looked at her cautiously, then cautiously and slowly drove down the street, leaning forward and concentrating on the road, giving the impression that the passing surroundings were shrouded in mist and appeared to him only a few feet from the end of his nose. They spoke little as Patrick drove through town, as though they might be overheard through the windows of the car. Out in the Berkshires, though, they began to talk.

Patrick worked night shifts at the Red Roof Inn, in Chicopee, Massachusetts. He didn't like the job, and spoke of it with bewilderment, somehow baffled as to how it had come to be his. He had been the manager at a Blockbuster Video before that, but it had closed. He'd gotten a divorce at the same time, and a judge had ordered him to pay child support for his two daughters, five and seven. "My bitch ex-wife doesn't work though," he said, and Amy flinched a little. He hadn't previously come anywhere near language so strong.

*This guy is such a loser,* Amy thought. But the assessment gave her a feeling of security. He and she occupied worlds and concerns miles apart. No one could tie them together. They would barely understand each other. She had found a truly safe man with whom to explore.

“Have you heard of the Glamour Boutique?” Patrick asked, as they came out of the Berkshires and into central Massachusetts. He glanced at her with something like a smirk. Amy could see he wanted a particular answer.

“No, should I have?”

“Just wondering if you like the same kind of stories I like.” He emphasized the word “stories,” drawing it out.

“Like what stories?”

“Erotica.”

“Yeah,” Amy adjusted her seatbelt so she could lean subtly against the door and watch him. “I like erotica.”

“Glamour Boutique is the sponsor for the Fictionmania archive. Do you read Fictionmania?”

As if he had physically shown it to her, Amy could picture the Glamour Boutique ad banner, depicting a line drawing of a Victorian-looking woman lacing up another woman’s corset, an ad banner that floated at the bottom of the fictionmania.tv site.

Amy didn’t answer. The car banked through a turn on the highway. She had never spoken about what she masturbated to with anyone. The stories

of women forcing boys into girlhood. The online archive of Fictionmania stored 20,000 of these stories, and anonymous writers all across the world added more every day. From the sheer number of stories, Amy understood there had to be thousands of writers, and therefore exponentially more readers, tens, or hundreds of thousands of people—an entire literary subculture whose existence required that subculture itself never be acknowledged. The stories formed a trans samizdat so clandestine that you'd have to be a certain sort of trans to ever think about looking for it in the first place. You must be this trans to ride this ride. The first rule of Fictionmania Club is never talk about Fictionmania Club.

The stories were dangerous. But she knew, from the self-evident existence of the site, that all over the world, eyes were eating up the text and penises were spurting at the climaxes of the stories, when the crossdressers themselves first took dick, or when a former-boy-now-buxom-shemale was humiliated and raped, or when a strong man was feminized against his will. The femininity forced upon the males was the ultimate in degradation and humiliation—and what did that say about her opinion of femininity? Amy hated how much she loved the

stories, the orgasms that came as she read them, at all hours of the day, sneaking in a story in the twenty minutes between classes, or whole nights spent in a jerk-off marathon, story after story, until reality began to fade. She knew that anyone she knew who discovered wouldn't understand. They'd just think she hated femininity and equated it with humiliation. She'd be shunned, and deservedly so. For years—until she transitioned, until she met women into rape-play, into servitude, and infantilization, sploshing, women who had eroticized and sexually defanged every unspeakable shame and violation life had thrown at their womanhood—she couldn't actually think of a single argument to counter the undeniable, orgasm-certified evidence of her unpardonable misogyny.

Patrick waited for a response. But Amy couldn't seem to find any words. Neither a confirmation nor a denial.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Patrick said.

“Yeah.” Amy admitted. “I know Fictionmania.”

“Which stories do you like?” Patrick asked.

Then without waiting for an answer, he continued, “I like the extreme body modifications, when they get huge boobs. I don’t like the stories where they transform through magic. I like the surgery though.

Because it really exists, so I know it might happen to me one day.” Patrick’s voice took on a note of brightness that Amy hadn’t yet heard.

The possibility of anyone choosing to foot the cost of surgically implanting Patrick with enormous breasts against his will struck Amy as no more or less likely than an elf-witch casting a spell to give Patrick boobs. But still Amy knew what he meant. She didn’t like the magic either. She liked the stories that were as close to her life as possible. A shy college boy. Domineering older women. What she really liked is when the women made the trans girls have sex with men. When the older women watched and laughed. But there was no way she’d admit that to Patrick.

“I usually choose the *Wedding Dress or Married* category,” Amy said. “Weddings are so kinky. I think just most non-kinky people never realize it. Think about it! You put a woman in a special elaborate outfit, and then one man gives her to another man like some kind of BDSM scene, and then they put like a symbolic collar on the woman’s finger, and then the man lifts her dress to show everyone there—maybe hundreds of people!—her garter and lingerie, and then he picks her up and takes her away to fuck her while

everyone else knows it's happening! It's so dirty. Hetero weddings are the kinkiest thing I could ever imagine and they actually happen all the time. So I like to think about it happening to me."

She had never said anything like this aloud before. Patrick laughed. And then she laughed.

Then Patrick did something unexpected. For most of the drive, he'd been leaning forward, peering through the windshield, his hands at two and ten o'clock. But he dropped his left hand and started rubbing his crotch. Amy thought Patrick might just be adjusting, but no, he kept at it. He was playing with himself. He didn't so much as glance at her, just kept going, talking about which of the stories he liked from his favorite category, *Physically Forced or Blackmailed*.

For a moment, Amy felt disgusted. But isn't this what she wanted? Didn't she understand it? Hadn't she wanted to share the sexuality she hid with someone? Anyone? She reached down and rubbed herself too. But she couldn't keep going. The vibe in the car wasn't sexy. She felt like a boy, with a man, but a man she'd judged to be an unattractive loser. Maybe she'd feel differently after they had dressed up.

Glamour Boutique got fun after about a half an hour. The clerk introduced herself as Jen. As Amy's jitteriness faded, Jen actually began to help Amy with clothes. The sense of women advising each other, of a feminine space, nearly overwhelmed Amy. It was more than she could have hoped for. Wearing the breast forms and bra, she wanted to try on everything—not just the fetish clothes, items she'd only ever seen online—but simple dresses as well. "Always look for the empire waist," Jen encouraged, holding up a yellow dress, with a sash under the bust. "Everyone always thinks it's about minimizing the shoulders, but no, it's about the right ratio between shoulders and hips. Empire waists flare out, give you hips."

Amy and Patrick nodded, listening carefully. Patrick had touched Amy a few times now, in ways that Amy wasn't sure how to interpret. Once Patrick held up a dress against Amy's body and said, "This would look nice on you," then ran a hand down Amy's side, pressing the dress against it. On one hand, a contrail of unease followed Patrick's touch. On the other, she refused to let anything like that ruin the moment. A vague euphoria wafted over Amy. Here they were: a bunch of girls talking

clothes. How often had she been pierced by such conversations among girls she knew? Tasted the bitterness of keeping her mouth shut to convey the expected masculine aloofness to such womanly concerns? Initially, she glanced at Jen frequently, worried that Jen might be annoyed by their excitement or laughing at them. But no, she judged Jen's friendliness as genuine. It had to be boring to work in a place where you have to carefully avoid eye contact so often, like with that golfer. Maybe her and Patrick's excitement made them the better sort of customer.

Amy had read about transsexuals online. She'd even taken a test—the COGIATI (Combined Gender Identity and Transsexuality Inventory), developed by some transsexual woman and based on DSM psychological models to determine if the test takers were true transsexuals who needed to transition, or merely transgenderists—that is, male fetishists, for whom transition would be a tragic mistake. She'd read whatever psychology about trans people that she could find at her college library and on the internet. Most if it was ten or twenty years old. According to what she'd found online, there were two types of male-to-female transsexuals. Those people

who had always been girls, who had played with dolls, were attracted to men, and hated their penises. The second kind—the autogynephiles—were men who got turned on by the idea of themselves as women. These were the fetishistic crossdressers, who conformed to all sorts of male stereotypes, and loved their penises and got turned on wearing women's clothing. They ought not transition, the psychologists said—they weren't really women, they were fetishists who took their indulgence too far. Amy caught the whiff of moralism in this assessment and understood what it meant. There was something bad and immoral about autogynephilia. In the comments below the psychology articles, a number of trans women irate at this psychology always posted rebuttals. They called the idea of autogynephilia transphobic. They called the psychologists who came up with it chasers.

Amy remembered how one of them patiently explained that the term autogynephilia only works if you don't think trans women are women. If you do, then you immediately see that a majority of women, cis or trans, are all autogynephiles, and that most men are autoandrophiles—it's not something special about trans women. Of course women are

turned on by being women! Watch any porn and the sexuality of everyone in it is actually about their own auto-andro/gyne-philia. Listen to them talk. It's all about validating their own gender. Oh yeah, I'm your little slut...yeah baby, you like this big cock? And alone on their laptops somewhere: the viewers, turned on by identifying with people identifying with their gender.

Other trans women claimed that these psychologists had begun to be discredited, that their research methods were revealed to be the suspect practice of hanging around in bars without IRB approval in order to pick up trans women, sleep with them, and later write clinical papers both based upon and obscuring those experiences. But Amy doubted those trans women. No one with expertise cared what the trans women had to say. Who were they to tell psychologists with doctorates—scientists!—that they were wrong? And hadn't it been a transsexual woman herself who'd written the COGIATI test? Of course a bunch of deranged creeps whose paraphilia revolved around womanhood would claim they're women—crazy people never think they are crazy! Check and mate, sickos!

Amy didn't have to take the test to know her own result: a fetishist, a pervert. But she took it anyhow, a series of bizarre questions about imagining shapes, and quantifying empathy. *You are talking with a friend. Outside, far away, somebody is honking their horn regularly and endlessly. It is not very loud, you can just barely hear it in the quiet room. What is your reaction? You meet somebody and they are polite to you, but they are actually secretly disliking you. How likely are you to know this? You will never, ever be a woman. You must live the rest of your days entirely as a man, and you will only get more masculine with each passing year. There is no way out. What is your reaction? You're in a desert walking along when all of the sudden you look down and you see a tortoise. It's crawling towards you. You reach down to flip the tortoise over on its back. The tortoise lies on its back, its belly baking in the hot sun, beating its legs trying to turn itself over, but it can't, not without your help. But you're not helping. Why is that?*

Some of the questions made no sense—but others betrayed by their wording a clumsy trend in the conclusions they would formulate: if you had spatial skills and active sexuality, you were clearly a fetishistic man, and if you empathized with people

and didn't care about sex, you might be that rarest of things: a true transsexual, a woman trapped in a man's body. But Amy wasn't that. The test showed her to be the autogynephilic creep she already assumed she would be.

Jen was obviously a true transsexual. Amy had never met a trans girl in person, and her fascination with Jen bordered on painful. Look at her. She looks like a girl. She sounds like a girl. More than that, Amy thought: she wanted something from Jen. Something like sexual attraction, but shaded differently. Something closer to the thrill she felt when a celebrity passed by. A nameless wanting in the direction of that celebrity. The abstract beckoning that celebrities exude. The gravitational pull of their fame that tugged at Amy so that she felt anxious to be close, to be seen and to be valued. To feel those celebrity eyes move frictionlessly across the smooth surface of a clamoring fandom and suddenly catch upon her, stop dead, and return her gaze. That moment of mutual recognition, that's the only way to have your existence stamped valid, to transcend the anonymity of mere fan, of inconsequential gawker. Jen's was a non-celebrity celebrity that Amy could feel. A pull that *only she would feel*. Amy kept

turning to see where in the store Jen was.

Shockingly, Jen seemed to be having a good time. Moreover, she kept saying things that countered what the COGIATI test said a true transsexual should feel. When Patrick asked about French maid outfits, Jen clucked in approval. “Back wall,” she said, pointing, “But also, we have some sexy ones in boxes in back that we never put out, because they take up so much space when they’re unfolded. It’s not the cheap Halloween style, they are the sensual kind with petticoats that actually fluff.” In mock *sotto voce* she admitted, “I got one myself. I have a thing for that flouncy feel. My boyfriend always wants me to tidy up in it for him. But no way, I just wear it around my apartment for special, uh, *private* time.” She giggled at the admission and Amy thought that Jen might spontaneously combust from her own incredible and suddenly-revealed transcendent hotness, an attractiveness that had only a tangential relationship to her appearance.

Patrick stood on one leg, working a pair of panty-hose up the calf of his other, while Jen stood in front of him with a French Maid outfit at the ready.

“So, are you one of the owners of this store?”

Patrick asked Jen.

“Me? No, ha. I just work here. Stephen owns it.”

“Who’s Stephen?”

“The owner. You’ve probably seen his ads on Craigslist.” She pointed one of her black-polished nails at Amy and smirked. “He looks for the ones like you.”

Amy might have asked what Jen meant “by you.” What about her did Jen find of special notice? Instead the bell above the door chimed.

A pleasant-looking woman, plump with loosely curled blonde hair, walked in with her teenage daughter, who looked healthy, wearing casual athletic gear. The two of them had smiles across their faces, were mid-laugh—perhaps lured into the store by the super-fun sounding name—Glamour Boutique! What mother and daughter wouldn’t have fun with a little glamour on an outing together? The laughs died mid-haha.

Patrick whoofed out a little involuntary yelp tripping over half-donned panty-hose to position himself behind a rack of clothing.

Alarmed comprehension dawned on the mother’s face as she took in the store. But by then

it was too late. Patrick, Amy, and Jen had all seen her come in. Turning in horror would let everyone know what she thought of them. No, she would show her daughter how to play it cool.

Amy's joy in having found a store, a feminine space meant especially for her dimmed, as the light fades when a heavy cloud crosses the sun—then winked out completely. The sense of safety that she'd spun over the store vanished. Everything on the racks shrugged off their previous disguises to reveal themselves as tawdry and desperate. Inwardly, she disavowed the space. This store did not reflect her, she did not truly belong there.

Patrick, still only half in his pantyhose, blanched to a beige color and made a fast-walk bee-line for the curtains that hid the changing area, stepping on and dragging the only half-donned hosiery as she did. Jen winced, still holding the French maid dress. This must have happened to her many times, the panic among customers she'd just coaxed into comfort when civilians wandered into the store.

After a moment, the mother decided on a course of action: she would browse. After all, it was

a store and she was allowed to browse, wasn't she? In an attempt to look natural, the mother pawed through the closest rack and bravely held up a top complex with straps and spandex, "Oh look at this? It's interesting? What do you think?" Despite her bravado, a cringe squeaked into her voice.

"Yes," said her daughter, without even glancing at it. Her gaze raked the walls, hung thickly with gaffs, breast plates, wigs. Amy suddenly saw the store through her eyes: a *Silence of the Lambs*-level display of disembodied female body parts. Worst of all: the red-faced men, one now hiding, the other creepily fingering panties and who knows what else. The specialty panties—with wider gusset for women of all anatomies!—that Amy held in her hand, and which she had been examining with curiosity when the bell above the door chimed, burned radioactively. She longed to drop them, to throw them away from her, but feared that doing so would attract attention her way, the equivalent of waving a lace-trimmed, pink flag. So she stood frozen, apparently transfixed by a pair of panties, confirming every stereotype of the perverted fetishistic transvestite, and hating the image she felt sure she presented. She wanted to apologize.

She couldn't help herself. She stared at the teenager daughter. What was the speed of calculations whirring through that poor girl's mind? How long would her mother fake-browse before they could escape?

"Wigs!" proclaimed the mother, mustering her best cheer. "Fun!"

"Wigs," agreed Jen, setting down the maid's outfit and extending a white hand in a gesture to the wall, "The ones at the bottom are synthetic, at the top are human hair." Like the store itself, Jen had transformed in a moment. Her previous secret celebrity had inverted itself. The polarity on her magnetism had switched: she now repelled rather than attracted. To Amy, Jen's posture now landed with echoes of witches—had she just said "human hair?" Grotesque. As Jen walked back behind the counter into the sunlight streaming through the front window, the witchy aspect grew more pronounced. Amy, who had had Jen's arms around her, fastening a bra in place, before she realized Jen was trans, could no longer see anything but how trans she was, accompanied by revulsion towards every feature she identified: the lank dark hair, heavy knuckles, gaunt cheeks, traces of last night's makeup darkening the

circles beneath her eyes. Fear had poisoned Amy's thoughts, and she lost control of them. Cruelly and involuntarily, Amy's vision flayed away all the beauty from Jen like sheets of skin peeled from her body.

"We have wig caps, if you want to try one?" Jen said.

"Mom. Let's go," said the daughter. The rack of books behind her were illustrated erotica titled "Forced Womanhood," their covers decorated with drawings of shemales bound and whipped.

"Yes, okay."

Out darted the daughter, but with the door open, her mother paused. She turned back towards us, her hand resting on the crossframe. "Your store is fun," she apologized, not just to Jen, but to everyone. She nodded, almost to herself, and a moment later the overhanging bell announced her departure.

On the ride home, Patrick drove too fast. The sky had darkened while Amy and Patrick had shopped in the Glamor Boutique, and fat drops of an April storm splatted onto the highway in uncountable tiny splashes, making the asphalt surface into television static. Amy didn't trust the Geo to stick to the sheeny road, slick with oil and rivulets,

especially not when Patrick turned off the interstate and into the state roads that cut over the Holyoke Range.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I was in a car accident when I was younger, so I get nervous. Can you slow down?” She hadn’t actually ever been in a car accident, but she didn’t know him very well, and it seemed socially easier to blame her unease on herself rather than his driving.

He grunted, and lifted his foot slightly from the accelerator. “Roll down the window,” he told her. “The fan on this car is broken and I can’t see through these windows.” She looked, and yes, the window had fogged opaque. Why didn’t he wipe them earlier? When she cracked the window, the sound of tires hissing over the wet pushed in, and droplets sprayed the left side of her face, but also flowing into the car came the pungent odor of the wet forest, a rich mixture of damp dirt, decay, moss, and sprouting leaves. Amy liked the way rain amplified the mustiest and most comforting smells of the forest, making the forest much more foresty, just how a wet dog smells so much more doggy.

And maybe the smell of the forest acted as aromatherapy for Patrick too. His posture released.

He wiped at the window, then leaned back, drove at a reasonably slow speed.

“That was awful,” he said into the sound of rain and wind roaring past the cracked window. “Those women coming in while we were trying things on.”

“No, it was okay.” Amy assured Patrick, “I mean, why should we be embarrassed? It’s our store.” The possessive just slipped in. She wasn’t sure how the store became theirs, but the mother had said it too. *Your store.* The store for people like them.

“It wasn’t okay.” Patrick said.

Amy nodded. He was right. It wasn’t okay. She didn’t feel at all okay about it. She would do almost anything to never again be looked at the way those women had looked at her. It wasn’t that they had even been rude. They had simply seen her. Seen a true thing in her that she had spent her life making sure to never show to anyone who might look at her that way.

Once, when she had been about ten or eleven, her mother had gone on a business trip, and came home with gifts for Amy: a pair of florescent blue rollerblades with neon-yellow ratchet straps, and t-shirt on which the words Florida Keys and a

picture of a tropical fish had been embroidered in thick thread, rather than screen-printed. The thread on the inside of the shirt was very scratchy. After about a week of wearing the shirt, Amy had a very good idea. She went to the front porch, where her mother was planting geraniums in the window boxes.

“I love this shirt; it’s my favorite” she announced to her mother. “But it’s scratchy. It rubs and hurts my nipples. Can I borrow a bra?”

Her mother continued potting the flowers without turning around. “I’m sorry, can you do what?”

Amy’s voice wavered, less confident on her second time asking. She pulled her shirt away from her nipples to illustrate the problem. “The embroidery is scratchy. I was thinking a bra is good for that.” She had worn her mother’s bras in secret, when she was home alone. Those fascinating garments so distinct to women. Now she had an excuse to have a bra of her own, which even some of the girls in school were getting, but which she knew she wouldn’t get without some careful maneuvers on her part.

Her mother turned, a trowel still in her hand, and gave Amy a look of irritation. “Just wear

another t-shirt under it.”

“That will be too hot. I really think a bra is better.”

Her mother set the trowel down with a clunk and gave Amy strange look. She saw that her son wasn’t being stupid. It was the precursor to the look Amy had gotten from the women in the Glamour Boutique.

“That is not something a son asks his mother,” her mother said carefully, and in her tone, beneath the impassive way she said it, Amy could feel something harder, a pit of revulsion, pulling tightly in on itself. Her mother had never said something like that before; she was not the type to categorize behavior into what was and wasn’t done.

Amy saw, in a flash, that her mother knew. That her mother knew nothing about the request had to do with her clever excuse of scratched nipples, and worse, that the request had disturbed her mother. What seemed like a foolproof ruse had revealed everything.

“Oh!” Amy said, “I forgot! I have that tank top. I can wear that under it, and that won’t be too hot.” She smacked her palm against her forehead. “Of course.” Her mother’s strange gaze didn’t change.

Amy walked away with her mother's eyes still on her, and then she avoided her mother for as long as she could. At least until dinner that night.

But now, almost a decade later, Amy finally had her own bra. A bra especially for her. Not one pilfered from some girl's underwear drawer and stuffed into a backpack at a party. One she had bought herself, just as any woman might buy a bra for herself. She looked at the bag of her purchases, sitting at her feet in Patrick's car. She should have felt happy, but she didn't. She felt as if she had given into an urge that ought only be turned away from. Not even gazed at. As when people shut their eyes in horror at the possibility of an apparition. Don't even acknowledge it—it'll fuck up everything you know about the world.

In addition to the bra and breast forms she had bought a yellow dress—empire waist, as Jen had recommended. And a pair of white faux-leather stripper heels, six-inches tall and made from a cheap plastic with a thin ankle strap and a two inch platform. She'd also bought two pairs of panties. It had been very expensive, all this, nearly three hundred dollars. After those women left, the shopping never got quite as fun as it had been before. Jen seemed

more aware of how skittish she and Patrick were, and her suggestions were more circumspect, made from a distance. Amy supposed that had those women not come in, she would have bought much more, in that brief euphoric mood when for a short time, she'd forgotten that women's clothing could be dangerous. She wished, though, that she had bought a wig. She'd tried one on, and looked terrible. Jen had assured her that makeup would alleviate the resemblance to an '80s rocker that Amy had been shocked to find staring back at her from store's vanity mirror, instead of a beautiful woman. The difference between the effect that she had always hoped would occur if she were to have long hair, and the reality of what she'd seen, had so disheartened her that she couldn't bear to try on another model that might have worked better. Maybe if the shopping euphoria returned, she thought, but it never did.

"I have to be more careful than I was today," Patrick said, breaking Amy's reverie. "I can't let anyone find out about my crossdressing."

"Me neither," Amy said.

Patrick looked at her. "But you don't have that much to lose. I am going through a divorce. Anyone sees me and I could lose visitation with

my daughters.” He swallowed hard. “I used to wear matching panties with my wife—sometimes other stuff. She said it was fun, it was like a sexy game. But I know she has already told her lawyer about it and I think they are going to use it against me.”

“Wow. That sucks.” Amy only half-believed Patrick. Who was this woman who would let him wear panties around her? No. He had to be lying to impress her. Besides, Amy absolutely had as much to lose as Patrick, maybe more. Patrick was already a loser. She wasn’t.

“I can’t be seen in a store like that one.” Patrick continued. “It could have real consequences.”

“But wouldn’t anyone going into that store be going to it on purpose?”

“Those women weren’t there on purpose!”

Patrick had her there. She didn’t know what to say. This was some heavy adult shit. Custody. Divorce. Instead she changed the subject. “So do you still want to go to your house to dress up, though?” Other than her minuscule dorm room, Amy had nowhere to wear her new outfit. She couldn’t bear the idea of donning it all to strut the two steps that it took to cross her thinly-carpet-

ed room, back and forth, like a sad-eyed giraffe at the zoo, endlessly circling her tiny enclosure. Only worse, because at least a giraffe had admirers.

“Yes,” Patrick said, “Don’t you?”

“Mhmm, please,” said Amy.

For a long time, Amy would remember the day at the Glamour Boutique as erotically charged. But about the sex that she and Patrick had, she would remember very little, only that it was not erotic. Eventually, that would be how she’d come to understand that sex with men was for her. The erotic part lay in the dressing up, the foreplay, the mental switch into a feminine role. And yes, dressing up with men almost always culminated in sex, but a distant faraway sex—that Amy almost felt like she hadn’t participated in. The sex itself was necessary to break the spell. The orgasm functioned as a synecdoche for the purpose of the sex itself, a physical act you needed to release the tension that had been building and bring you back to yourself. After sex, the spell would dissipate, and you saw yourself as you truly were: a boy, lying dazed on his back in a stranger’s bed with a dress hiked up to the waist, a string of his own pre-cum on his thigh, and a

stranger lifting himself off the bed to sheepishly pull off a reservoir-filled condom.

While Patrick washed himself in the bathroom, Amy got her bearings. Took stock of the bed. The action figures lined up along the wall. The shemale porn DVD Patrick had playing on the TV and which he had stared at insistently and vacantly while he fucked Amy, the same as Amy had scrunched shut her eyes and gone far away, taking with her only the sensation of being penetrated, of being filled by cock, of being passive for a lover. But it was not Patrick's cock she had taken with her. Or, maybe, in one dimension it was. But in the place Amy had gone, it was Jen from the shop inside of her. The encounter, both real and not, expanded inside Amy's mind, a sequence that moved from that looped memory of Jen fitting Amy for a bra, then to Jen's imagined body, and then, in the faraway place that Amy had gone, Jen was fucking her, fucking her as a woman, and Amy could feel it couldn't she? The thrusting inside of her, the hands on her hips and shoulders—feel that? That was Jen fucking her. Yes, it was and would be as long as she clung tight to this place, and in this place she could enjoy it for once, she could feel everything as it should be.

“I’m coming,” Patrick had said, breaking the silence and loosening Amy’s grip on the place she had gone, so that it slipped away from her as when you let go of a ledge, and she fell careening back through the wormhole, through time and space, back to Patrick’s bed, where she opened her eyes, and saw him on top of her thrusting, then one last hard thrust, with his eyes locked on the television. She didn’t say anything. Not like with Rosie. No encouragement. No pretending that she had ever been present. Wordlessly, Patrick and she understood the rules—rules that she would henceforth employ for all sexual encounters with men: neither she nor Patrick would actually be there for the sex. They would take from each other what they could, each from their own places. They would use what they could of each others’ bodies. But of encouragement, or solace, or care—no, neither of them wanted any of that. Just give me enough of yourself to put me in touch with the part of me that can believe I’m a girl, and beyond that, go fuck yourself, in whatever theoretical dimension it is that you need to do that.







**B**aby, why are you crying?" Reese had asked. Why? Because some combination of hormones and poppers had made possible sex like Amy had given up on. The poppers made her too dumb to flee into herself, to send herself somewhere. And there she was with Reese. Not off elsewhere working to see herself as a woman when she lay on top of a woman, or replacing a man with someone else while he lay on top of her. She simply was: a woman present with a woman. It felt like some kind of healing, some kind of redemption. And all she could do was cry.

Later that night, Reese stroked her hair and whispered to her, "I'm sorry you've been in

so much pain for so long."

Any night before that one, Amy would have denied it, would have told Reese about all the privileges she had, about how lucky she had been compared to other trans women, how many advantages she'd been granted. How she didn't need anyone to feel sorry for her. How few of the readily nameable traumas she ever suffered. And without legible traumas to point to, what would pain make her? At best, a trans version of those Didion-worshipping bourgeois white girls who've subscribed to A Grand Unified Theory of [trans!] Female Pain, those minor-wound-dwelling brooders with no particular difficulties but for an inchoate sense of their own wrongedness, a wrongedness that falls apart when put into words but nonetheless justifies all manner of petulance and self-pity. In pain? No, not Amy.

That night, however, she gaped at Reese, shocked at how easily Reese had named what she'd gone through. She remembered Ricky telling her about Reese's uncanny ability to say what you need. Whether she could trust Reese or not, no one had ever said such a thing to her. No one had so casually

seen through her hollow stoicism to the accumulated disdain and disgust she harbored within. No one had ever implied that Amy ever had it rough, or that Amy might be wounded, or that Amy might be suffering too, including Amy. She didn't know she needed that kind of permission until that moment. So what if it took a liar to tell her the truth?

She opened her mouth to protest, gulped once, and collapsed into tears all over again, sobbing onto Reese's chest at all she had done to herself for years, at the hurt of what she'd inflicted upon herself and on the people she'd been with, while Reese gripped her and didn't tell her to stop.







### *Author's Note*

*This novella is an excerpt from a longer work-in-progress entitled Detransition, Baby. I don't know when I'll finish it, or if I ever will. So here is this, now. Because I can do such things.*



Torrey Peters lives in Brooklyn. She has an MFA from the University of Iowa and her essays and stories have been published in *Prairie Schooner*, *Epoch*, *Brevity*, *McSweeney's*, *Fourth Genre*, *The Pinch*, *Shenandoah*, *Gawker.com*, and her work has been anthologized in *Best Travel Writing (2009, 2010)*, *Tinderbox Editions*, *I'll Tell You Mine: 35 Years of the Iowa Nonfiction writing program*, *WaveForm: Twenty-First Century Essays By Women*. However, past publications aside, she's trans, and has concluded that the publishing industry doesn't serve trans women. So now, she gives her work away for free to other trans girls. For more of her work, including her other novellas, *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones* and *The Masker*, check her website, [www.torreypeters.com](http://www.torreypeters.com) and follow her on Twitter: @torreypeters